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Castro Attempt to Stop Shaba Invasion Reported

By David Binder
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President Fidel Castro informed the United States on May 17 that he learned early in April of plans by insurgents to invade Shaba province in Zaire and tried unsuccessfully to stop the invasion, Senate sources reported yesterday. The attack started over the weekend of May 13 and 14.

The statement attributed to Castro raised new questions about President Carter's assertion eight days later on May 25 that Cuba "obviously did nothing" to hold back the invasion by 2,000 or more insurgents operating from Angola. Cuba is believed to have 18,000 to 20,000 troops in Angola.

Sen. Dick Clark, D-Iowa, chairman of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on African affairs, said in a telephone interview that while he did not regard the disclosure of new information about Castro's position as "all that central," he felt that "it would have been useful in the discussion of the Cuban role if the president had made this clear."

THERE HAS BEEN controversy between several senators and Carter over the connection between Cuban forces in Angola and the Katangan insurgents since the invasion of Shaba province began. Carter has insisted that Cuban officers armed, trained and prepared the Katangans for their raid on the mining center of Kolwezi, in which hundreds were killed.

Clark said that Sen. George S. McGovern, D-S.D., Friday read a secret State Department cable to the Foreign Relations Committee, giving Castro's description of the evolution of the rebel attacks and his purported efforts to stop them.

The cable was sent to Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance by Lyle F. Lane, who heads the United States' interest section in Havana, following a meeting on May 17 with Castro.

According to Senate sources the cable quoted Castro as saying that he had learned early in April that the insurgent force was contemplating a raid on Shaba province, their tribal homeland, from which they had either been driven or had voluntarily left more than three years ago.

THE LANE CABLE described Castro as saying he was "disturbed" by the reports and had immediately approached the Angolan government head, President Agostino Neto, to urge him to call off the invasion, arguing that it would only harm Angola.

The cable added that Castro said one reason his intercession failed might have been the fact that Neto was ill and staying in the Soviet Union at the time.

The Katangan insurgents are based in camps along the Zaire frontier, hundreds of miles from Luanda, the Angolan capital.

Several senators who attended the closed committee hearing Friday expressed skepticism about Castro's veracity, but added that they were disturbed by the fact that Carter had not bothered to inform them of the Lane cable.

"The point is that the administration never told us about it," said one senator, who asked not to be named.

Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., the Senate majority leader, in a briefing for newsmen yesterday, said that regardless of the new disclosure, "the Cubans are acting as the cat's paw of the Soviets in Africa and are in control in Angola, the troops which invaded Zaire did come from Angola, and the Cubans have trained Katangans and supplied them with equipment." Byrd added: "Who knew what and where is somewhat peripheral."

A WHITE HOUSE spokesman said there would be no comment yesterday on the new disclosure about the Cuban role in the Shaba province incursion. Nor was it clear whether McGovern or Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, would press the White House for an explanation of Carter's handling of Castro's statement about trying to halt the invaders.

The administration's first declaration on the subject, on May 18, noted that Castro had denied there was Cuban involvement in the invasion, directly or indirectly. On May 25 Carter declared in Chicago: "The government of Angola must bear a responsibility for the deadly attack, which was launched from its territory, and it's a burden of responsibility shared by Cuba."

He went on: "We believe that Cuba had known of the Katangan plan to invade and obviously did nothing to restrain them from crossing the border. We also know that the Cubans have played a key role in training and equipping the Katangans who attacked."

ADM. STANSFIELD TURNER, director of Central Intelligence, last week briefed four Senate and House committees on the information and reports assembled by the Central Intelligence Agency which prompted Carter to make his assessment of the Cuban role.